Hijacked or hooked? Religion in populist politics in Germany

Hijacked or Hooked?
Religion in Populist Politics in Germany

The anonymous authors of *Christianity in the AfD,* a provocative pamphlet printed by a Christian publishing house, aim to analyze and assess the theological themes running through the political program of the populist party "Alternative for Germany (*Alternative für Deutschland*)"—"with," as their advertisement announces, "surprising insights for some."[1] Turning page after page, the reader discovers that almost all of the pages are blank. There are no theological themes in the program, so the authors had nothing to analyze or assess. Complaining that the cover of *Christianity in the AfD* makes it look like a party publication, the AfD considered taking the authors to court. But with or without a court case, the plot had worked: the populists' claim to Christianity had been exposed as empty.

Populist politics is increasingly interpreted as a hijacking of religion.[2] Although the populists continue to claim Christianity for their political purposes, so the interpretation goes, "true" Christianity is opposed to populism as much as populism is opposed to "true" Christianity. While I agree with this interpretation, I have a hunch that it might let both the populists and their critics off the theological hook. I propose that a theology that dismisses the populist claim to Christianity without discussion runs the risk of confirming rather than criticizing the patterns of populist politics. Hence, I put forward a response to the rise of populism in Germany that calls for conversations about the identity of Christianity. What is needed is a theology that retrieves the identity of Christianity in open and open-ended conversations to which both Christians and non-Christians can contribute. These conversations are a hook that can return the populists and their critics to theology—with, hopefully, surprising insights for some.

The Hijackers

[1] See *Christliches in der AfD* (Würzburg: Echter, 2018). Throughout this chapter, translations from primary and secondary literature in German are my own unless stated otherwise.
[2] For a survey, including a number of striking case studies, see the convincing compilation by Nadia Marzouki, Duncan McDonnell and Olivier Roy (eds), *Saving the People: How Populists Hijack Religion* (London: Hurst, 2016).

Populism is a contested concept, but it needs to be defined and described in order to discuss it. In his seminal study, *What Is Populism?*, political theorist Jan-Werner Müller surveys the surge of populist politics today.[3] He argues that populists pretend to speak for the people—"populism" is derived from the Latin *populus*, "people"—by pitting "the people" against "the elites" and "the elites" against "the people." But while the populist appeal to the people appears democratic, it actually attacks democracy. As Müller argues: "Populists claim that they, and they alone, represent the people."[4] When politics is reduced to issues of identity, however, it inhibits democratic deliberation and discussion about different and diverse political positions: if you don't belong to "the people" your political positions are illegitimate and if you do belong to "the people" your political positions are legitimate. But in democracies, politics is about deliberation and discussion. Müller points to the patterns of populism. Whether you defend or despise humanitarian immigration policies—of course, populists almost always argue against them—is not enough to decide whether you are or aren't a populist. *How* you argue for your position is pertinent: populists dismiss opposing political positions by declaring themselves the one and only voice of the people.[5] In Germany, these patterns of populism can be detected both outside and inside the parliaments.

Once PEGIDA stepped into the public square and onto the political scene, neither analysts nor activists could circumvent populism anymore. The letters PEGIDA stand for *Patriotische Europäer gegen die Islamisierung des Abendlandes*, suggesting that the protesters identify themselves as patriots struggling against what they see as the "Islamization" of Europe. What started as small and scattered protests in Dresden, the capital city of Saxony, Germany, soon had spin-offs across the country.[6] During their protests—PEGIDA calls them "strolls (*Spaziergänge*)"—the slogan "We are the people (*Wir sind das Volk*)" is displayed like a shield: the people are mobilized and march against the non-people.[7] Since the culmination of their protests when more than ten thousand picketers strolled through Dresden, the protests are

[3] Jan-Werner Müller, *What Is Populism?* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2016).
[4] Ibid., 3.
[5] Ibid., 101-103. See also Jan-Werner Müller, "'Das wahre Volk' gegen alle Anderen: Rechtspopulismus als Identitätspolitik," *Aus Politik und Zeitgeschichte: Zeitschrift der Bundeszentrale für politische Bildung* 69/9-11 (2019), 18-24.
[6] For a short survey, including statistics, see Hans Vorländer, Maik Herold and Steven Schäller, *PEGIDA* (Wiesbaden Springer VS, 2016).
[7] PEGIDA appropriates symbols and slogans from the Peaceful Revolution of 1989/90 that brought down the "socialist" security state. See my "'We Can Do This!' Tackling the Political Theology of Populism," in Ulrich Schmiedel and Graeme Smith (eds), *Religion in the European Refugee Crisis* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018), 205-224.

getting smaller and smaller.[8] The populist protests have moved on, from the outside to the inside of parliaments across Germany. As Lutz Bachmann, the founder of PEGIDA, announced in a speech he delivered during one of the strolls: PEGIDA welcomes and works with the AfD.[9]

The AfD was set up as a party-political platform for those skeptical of the European Union, but the central concern shifted more and more towards issues of identity. After a number of leadership changes (including one in which Bernd Lucke, the party's founding father, left because of the extreme positions taken by the party leadership[10]), Germany's identity is now at the core of the political program. The program seems successful. The AfD is represented in parliaments throughout Germany, including the *Bundestag*, the federal parliament in the capital city Berlin. Polls see its influence increasing rather than decreasing. Like PEGIDA, the "Program for Germany (*Programm für Deutschland*)" that the AfD published recently pits the people against the non-people in order to criticize the elites, claiming that the AfD is the one and only party that defends "the sovereignty of the people (*Volkssouveränität*)" against internal and external attacks.[11] The AfD's program is the perfect paradigm for the patterns of populism.

Both inside and outside of the parliaments, then, the patterns of populism are prevalent in contemporary German politics. In populist politics, the people's identity is interpreted in a way that allows the populists to draw a strict and stable distinction between the people and the non-people. In turn, the distinction enables and equips the populists to delegitimize political opposition and public opinion that differs. But who are "the people"? Who are "the non-people"? And how can one tell them apart?

The Hijacked

Populists inside and outside of the parliaments claim ownership of Christianity for their political ends. PEGIDA protesters carry candles and crosses to characterize their protests as

[8] There has been considerable controversy about the number of protesters. See the statistics available at https://durchgezaehlt.org/ (accessed 29 April 2019).
[9] The speech he delivered during a stroll on 8 January 2018, after the movement had lost many members, shows the unabated political and parliamentary ambitions of PEGIDA in spite of these losses. Bachmann runs a channel on youtube.com which makes clips of the protests, including the speeches, available (accessed 29 April 2019).
[10] This leadership change was only the first one. The ones that followed moved the AfD further and further to the right. For Lucke, the party is now "rechtsextrem," right-wing extremist. See the "Brandbrief" he published in 2019, available at http://bernd-lucke.de/brandbrief-afd/ (accessed 29 April 2019).
[11] See AfD, *Programm für Deutschland: Wahlprogramm der Alternative für Deutschland* (Berlin: AfD, 2017), 7. The program is available at www.afd.de/wahlprogramm (accessed 29 April 2019).

Christian.[12] Snapshots of one cross—large, lit up, and painted in the colors of the German flag—has been shared online and offline as a symbol for PEGIDA's claim to Christianity. The "A" in PEGIDA stands for "Abendland." The term is tricky to translate, but the contrast between "Abendland" and "Morgenland", "land of the evening" and "land of the morning," captures the concept of a clash between "occident" and "orient." Crucially, this contrast is conceptualized through religion. "Abendland" is identified with what is Christian and "Morgenland" is identified with what is non-Christian.[13] So for PEGIDA, there are Christian people suppressed by politicians, on the one hand, and non-Christian non-people supported by politicians, on the other. "I feel impaired in the practice of my religion," Bachmann insists in one of his speeches.[14] PEGIDA's Christianity is not defined by what it is but by what it is not—namely, Islam. Citing statements by clergy, Bachmann, claims:[15] "They come in order to occupy Europe. If Europe was incorporated into Dar al-Islam, we would have to let go of liberty and equality. […] In the Sharia, we can read that the whole world should be subjugated to Dar al-Islam. […] Muslims have to learn it by heart. […] They have to do what has been written down." He continues: "Whoever knows Islam understands well why the church should fear it. […] It is beyond doubt that Islam wants to rule the world. Once the Muslims are the majority—regardless in which country of the earth—they have the religious duty to rule this country." For Bachmann, all Muslims have the duty to kill "the kafir, the unbeliever, who is: you." Religion is the identity marker that decides whether you are or aren't part of the people. For populists, this decision is *never* neutral: non-people following indecent un-Christian values don't belong to Germany, while people following decent Christian values do belong to Germany.

In the AfD's "Program for Germany," religion fulfils a strikingly similar function. Christianity is identified and interpreted as a core component of past and present German culture. The program refers to "*Leitkultur*," the "leading culture" that has to permeate the whole

[12] For a detailed discussion of PEGIDA's claims to Christianity, see again my "'We Can Do This!' Tackling the Political Theology of Populism," 205-224.
[13] For a succinct summary of the history of "Abendland" and "Morgenland" in German theology, see Reiner Anselm, "Abendland oder Europa? Anmerkungen aus evangelisch-theologischer Perspektive," *Zeitschrift für Evangelische Ethik* 57/4 (2013), 272-281
[14] Bachmann in a speech delivered during a stroll on 1 December 2014.
[15] Bachmann in a speech delivered during a stroll on 1 August 2016. I am not reproducing the names of the clergy Bachmann claims to cite, because I was unable to verify the two citations. However, the fact that anti-Islamic attitudes have allowed for an alliance of xenophobes inside and outside the churches is no secret. See Sonja Angelika Strube, "Problemanzeige: Rechtsextreme Tendenzen in sich christlich verstehenden Medien," in *Rechtsextremismus als Herausforderung für die Theologie*, ed. Sonja Angelika Strube (Freiburg: Herder, 2015), 18-35.

country.[16] Such a *Leitkultur* is a weapon in the clash of cultures, the "Kulturkampf" between the non-Christian and the Christian, *Morgenland* and *Abendland*.[17] Islam—interpreted as a "doctrine of salvation (*Heilslehre*)"[18]—comes up negatively rather than positively throughout the program, and much more often than Christianity. Islam is in conflict with the democratic order of Germany.[19] It is a "carrier of cultural traditions… that cannot be integrated" into the country.[20] It is waging a "war of culture (*Kulturkrieg*)."[21] Only their political practice and their political program, the AfD insists, adequately address the "confrontation by Islam."[22] Religion is inextricably interwoven with the patterns of populism.

For the populists inside and outside of the German parliaments, Christianity is about "belonging" rather than "believing."[23] It is *not* about faith in God. However, given that the Europe to which the populists would like to belong is based on nostalgia, a crooked construction cobbled together from bits and bops of the history of Christianity, populism is also about believing in belonging. Populists belong and believe in a Europe in which the values of dignity and decency, seen as started and sustained by Christian culture, contrast with the values of indignity and indecency, seen as started and sustained by non-Christian culture. The contrast is strict, strong and stable. The significance of Islam in European history is ignored. There would be no Christian *Abendland* without Islam and no Islamic *Morgenland* without Christianity, given how much Christianity has learnt from Islam and how much Islam has learnt from Christianity throughout history. However, in populist politics religion is reduced to identity: in the case of Christianity, the identity is positive, thus characterizing "the people"; in the case of non-Christianity, the identity is negative, thus characterizing "the non-people."

In her comprehensive comparative study *The Crisis of Multiculturalism in Europe*, historian Rita Chin clarifies how such a reduction of religion leads to the construction of the essentialist and essentializing difference between Europeans and non-Europeans which she describes as "new racism."[24] Comparing the use of religion in a variety of European countries, she points to debates about migration in the German parliament of the 1980s. Alfred Dregger,

[16] AfD, *Programm für Deutschland*, 47.
[17] Ibid.
[18] Ibid. It is unclear what is meant by "Heilslehre" here. Theologically, it would be interesting to know whether Christianity is also a "Heilslehre" for the AfD.
[19] Ibid., 34.
[20] Ibid., 47.
[21] Ibid., 34.
[22] Ibid., 9.
[23] See Olivier Roy, "Beyond Populism: The Conservative Right, the Courts and the Churches and the Concept of a Christian Europe," in *Saving the People*, 193.
[24] See Rita Chin, *The Crisis of Multiculturalism in Europe: A History* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2017), 140.

then chairman of the conservative cooperation of Christian Democratic Union (CDU) and Christian Social Union (CSU), addressed the parliament in a debate about migration, naming Islam as the issue at stake: "The Turkish people were not shaped by Christianity, rather by Islam—another high culture, and I stress, high culture. [...] Even in its more secular form, the cultural impulses of Christian and Islamic high culture have a lasting effect on our peoples. This contributes, in addition to a pronounced national pride of the Turks, to the fact that they are not assimilable. They want to remain what they are, namely Turks. And we should respect this."[25]

According to Chin, Dregger's speech, regardless of whether it was or wasn't populist, "marked the very first moment that religion was used to define an entire national group within European political discourse. The fact that this shift first occurred in Germany is not especially surprising: Turks were the largest group of 'foreigners' in the Federal Republic."[26] Chin concludes that the strategies of new racism "carefully avoided the [...] biologically inflected notions of race […]. As political weapons, however, they served a similar set of functions, routinely characterizing entire groups of immigrants as unfit for […] integration because of the intractability of their cultures."[27] The reference to religion continues the reference to race without taking recourse to blood and biology. The imprint of culture cannot be escaped. It is not people that "have" their religion, but religions that "have" their people.[28]

Religion, then, is not only integral to the patterns of populism in German politics. It is also dubious and dangerous because it allows populists to draw a distinction between people and non-people in a way that perceives and produces "the people" as a category that is not political but ethnocultural—which is to say, racist.

The Hooked

Christians across Germany have denounced populism as "un-Christian (*unchristlich*)," both in the pews and in the pulpits. Again and again, churches have argued against populist political agendas. But the populists hold their position against it. In their "Declaration of Principle

[25] Alfred Dregger, cited in ibid., 159.
[26] Ibid., 160.
[27] Ibid., 139-140.
[28] See also Wendy Brown, "Subjects of Tolerance: Why We Are Civilized and They Are the Barbarians," in Hent de Vries and Lawrence E. Sullivan (eds), *Political Theologies: Public Religions in a Post-Secular Age* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2006), 298-317.

(*Grundsatzerklärung*)", the "Christians in the AfD (*Christen in der AfD*)" assert that the confession of the Christian faith is central to their political and public work.[29] The "Declaration of Principle" indicates a number of issues that are intended to identify them as Christian, such as integration policies, family policies, and policies on Israel. These policies are framed in an account of the significance of Christian culture for Europe past and present. The publication *Confessions of Christians in the AfD* collects personal accounts of AfD participants and politicians.[30] The populists turn the tables. Churches are criticized for their denial or disavowal of Christianity. They are "Amtskirchen," hierarchical institutions that have lost touch with individuals—which is to say, the people. As Bachmann puts it in one of his speeches during a PEGIDA stroll, pertaining to the story of Judas in the Bible: in contrast to the "fat princes of the church who […] have sold their faith […] for […] a few pieces of silver," the populists are the ones who protect Christianity.[31] Who, then, is Christian? Have the churches hijacked Christianity from the populists or have the populists hijacked Christianity from the churches?

When populists argue that they—and only they—represent Christianity, they pit Christians against church leaders and church leaders against Christians.

The critique of elites is central to populist politics. However, reversing the populist claim to Christianity by pitting Christianity against populists and populists against Christianity runs the risk of confirming rather than confronting the patterns of populism: "this" is Christian while "that" is non-Christian, and—by definition—"this" and "that" cannot come together because these definitions draw a strict distinction between insiders and outsiders, the identity of Christianity and the alterity of Christianity. The idea is: let's get rid of the populists, they are false or fake Christians, their theology has nothing to do with "true" Christianity. In such a theological response, Christians would criticize the populists' *essence* of Christianity but confirm the populists' *essentialization* of Christianity. Of course, Christians can respond to populist politics by calling the populist claims to Christianity out for their crude and contentious concept(s) of Christianity.[32] But how can a response to populism avoid the trap of entering into the populist patterns itself? The identity of Christianity needs to be radically re-thought. Christianity is neither static nor stable.

---

[29] The "Declaration of Principle" is available at https://www.chrafd.de/index.php/grundsatzerklaerung (accessed 29 April 2019).
[30] Joachim Kuhs (ed), *Bekenntnisse von Christen in der Alternative für Deutschland* (Graz: Oxalis, 2018). The publication contains the "Grundsatzerklärung." It also includes the Apostolic Creed in the appendix.
[31] Bachmann in a speech delivered during a stroll on 1 August 2016.
[32] However, such a critique requires self-critique. Some of the statements churches in Germany have published about Islam come close to the patterns of populist politics.

From Hijacked to Hooked: Rethinking the Identity of Christianity

Whether consciously or unconsciously, both Archbishop Reinhard Marx, representing German Catholicism, and Bishop Heinrich Bedford-Strohm, representing German Protestantism, offered a re-thinking of the identity of Christianity in response to the so-called cross campaign in Bavaria.[33] When Bavaria's Head of State, Markus Söder, announced a decree, whereby the symbol of the cross ought to be displayed in the entrances of all offices of the state "as a visible confession to the fundamental values of the legal and social order of Bavaria,"[34] he tapped into the patterns of populist politics. By declaring and decreeing Christianity to be the cultural core of Bavaria's identity, the Christian was marshaled against the non-Christian, shutting Islam out. Populism can be found in the political mainstream as well as the political margins. Although they criticized Söder's understanding of Christianity, the church leaders did not respond by simply and solely declaring the cross campaign "un-Christian," but struck a balance between theologies of believing and theologies of belonging. According to Marx, the state's attempt to conquer the cross was at the core of the controversy. "The state cannot define the sign of the cross."[35] The symbol is defined neither by the state (against the church) nor by the church (against the state) but depends on the "witness of Christians," their beliefs and their behaviors.[36] Against Söder's interpretation of the cross as a sign of culture, the Archbishop insisted that the content of the central symbol of Christianity cannot be defined or re-defined at will. Since "one cannot have the cross without the man who was hung on it," the cross is always already more than culture.[37] "Hanging up a cross means: I want to orient my life towards the one who died for the world at the cross."[38] In accordance with the Archbishop, Bedford-Strohm maintained that the state cannot make clear what the cross should or should not signify. Christianity speaks for the cross as much as the cross speaks for Christianity. He insisted that "the cross cannot be reduced to a sign for the successful provision of a home (*Heimat*)."[39]

---

[33] For a detailed discussion of the so-called cross campaign, see my "'Take Up Your Cross': Public Theology between Populism and Pluralism in the Post-Migrant Context," *International Journal of Public Theology* 13/2 (2019), 140-162.
[34] See the minutes of the meeting in which the cabinet decided on the decree, "Bericht aus der Kabinettssitzung vom 24. April 2018," available at http://bayern.de/bericht-aus-der-kabinettssitzung-vom-24-april-2018 (accessed 29 April 2019).
[35] See "Kardinal Marx zum Kreuz-Erlass: 'Das Kreuz lässt sich nicht von oben verordnen,'" *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, 30 April 2018.
[36] Ibid.
[37] Ibid.
[38] See Heinrich Bedford-Strohm, "Identitätsdebatte in der Kirche: Den Sinn des Kreuzes öffentlich machen," *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, 10 May 2018.
[39] Ibid.

Instead, it is "at least as much the sign of a thought-provoking challenge of all the values of the world."[40] Both Archbishop and Bishop, then, pointed to the provocative potential of the cross as a symbol. Yet since the provocation of the cross has to be communicated under pluralized and pluralizing conditions, it requires a conversation about the cultures of the country to which both Christians and non-Christians ought to be allowed to contribute. The plurality of religious and non-religious worldviews has to find its place in the public square.

What is remarkable about the response is that it is not pitting "this" Christianity against "that" Christianity, but rather it returns to theology. The identity of Christianity is retrieved as a theological project rather than a theological possession. Christianity is interpreted as a practice. In the practical project of Christianity, belonging is not simply illegitimate and believing is not simply legitimate. Identity, then, can be retrieved, but in order to escape the anti-pluralist populist pattern, it needs to be retrieved *pluralistically*: in a way that opens identity up to the other.

Here, the church leaders' response to populist politics inside and outside of the parliaments could be pushed even further. What keeps Christians from calling for both crosses and crescents in the public square? Imagine the discussions that crosses and crescents in the entrances of public offices could provoke.[41] People with different views about the Christian and the non-Christian could be enticed and encouraged to talk to each other. One must not be naïve about what social scientists call the "contact hypothesis," whereby face-to-face contact between different and diverse people fosters mutual recognition and facilitates mutual respect.[42] On the ground, contact is much more complicated and much more controversial. Nonetheless, provoking and preserving conversations about Germany's cultures could be a crucial contribution of religions such as Christianity in response to the rise of populism. For Christians, what is needed is a theology that retrieves Christianity's identity in an open and open-ended way so that identity can become and be the theological hook for conversations across religious and non-religious contrasts.

The publication *Christians in the AfD* invites, perhaps inadvertently, such a re-thinking of identity: "If you are able to name Christian standpoints in the AfD, please let us know" the anonymous authors write towards the end.[43] Here, a conversation about Christianity is opened up. Who is to say that only Christians are allowed to contribute?

---

[40] Ibid.
[41] Given the way populists pit Christianity against Islam (and Islam against Christianity), cross and crescent seem to be the most significant at the moment, but I see no reason not include the symbols of other faiths too.
[42] Müller, *What Is Populism?*, 114.
[43] *Christliches in der AfD*, 32.

Ulrich Schmiedel is Lecturer in Theology, Politics and Ethics at the School of Divinity in the University of Edinburgh. Specializing in political and public theology, he also serves as Deputy Director of the Centre for Theology and Public Issues. He is the author of *Elasticized Ecclesiology: The Concept of Community after Ernst Troeltsch*. His publications also include the co-edited compilations *Dynamics of Difference: Christianity and Alterity*; *Religious Experience Revisited: Expressing the Inexpressible?*; and *Religion in the European Refugee Crisis*.